

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSM-03 DHA-02 MCT-01 SY-05 CIAE-00
PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01
PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 /067 W
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R 081408Z JUL 77
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3835
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
DIA WASHDC
SECDEF
USCINCEUR
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 4286

E.O. 11652: XGDS-4
TAGS: PINS, PINR, SY, IZ
SUBJECT: SYRIAN INTERNAL POLITICS FROM THE RAZZUQ ASSASSINATION
TO THE JULY 4 BOMBING

REF: A. DAMASCUS 3970, B. DAMASCUS 4181

1. SUMMARY: THERE HAVE BEEN REPORTS AND RUMORS OF MORE
KILLINGS SINCE ASSASSINATION OF BRIG. RAZZAQ JUNE 18. ONE
OFFICER WAS SHOT FEW DAYS AGO IN MAZRAA SECTION OF DAMASCUS;
FIFTH DIVISION COMMANDER REPORTED AMBUSHED NEAR SUWAYDA BUT
HAS SURVIVED; AND AIR FORCE OFFICER MAY HAVE BEEN KILLED IN
ALEPPO, BUT WE CANNOT YET VERIFY LATTER REPORT. SARG
PUBLICLY BLAMING IRAQ FOR BOMBING ACROSS FROM AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS, BUT THIS SEEMS ATTEMPT TO BLUNT WIDESPREAD
SPECULATION THA INTERNAL OPPONENTS ARE BEHIND INCIDENTS.

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WE UNDERSTAND FROM SHOUFI THAT SUPPPORTERS OF FORMER STRONGMAN
SALAH JADID HAVE REACHED POLITICAL AGREEMENT TO COORDINATE EFFORTS
AGAINST AL-ASSAD REGIME, BUT SHOUFI DISCOUNTS CHARGE THAT
JADIDISTS-IRAQIS BEHIND THESE INCIDENTS. WITH ASSAD REGIME
CONFRONTING SUNNI AND ALWAITE ELEMENTS DETERMINED
TO TOPPLE HIM, IT IS LIKELY THAT MORE INCIDENTS WILL OCCUR.
IF JADID-IRAQI LINKAGE IS TRUE, AL-ASSAD WILL BE SUBJECT TO

STRONGER PRESSURE FROM REJECTIONISTS AS HE CONTINUES TO SEEK
PEACE SETTLEMENT. END SUMMARY.

2. THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE ASSASSINATION OF BRIG. RAZZUQ
JUNE 18 AND THE BOMBING ACROSS FROM AIR FORCE HEADQUARTERS
IN DAMASCUS JULY 4 HAS APPARENTLY BEEN MARKED BY INTENSIVE
POLITICAL ACTIVITY ON SYRIA'S INTERNAL FRONT. PIECING
TOGETHER REPORTS FROM VARIOUS SOURCES, IT APPEARS THAT MORE
OFFICERS HAVE BEEN VICTIMS OF ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS.
WE UNDERSTAND THAT A GENERAL WAS AMBUSHED AROUND JULY 2
BETWEEN SUYAYDA AND DERA'A, AND POSSIBLY HIS DRIVER AND
ADIE-DE-CAMP KILLED. ACCORDING TO TWO USUALLY RELIABLE
SOURCES, THIS OFFICER WAS COMMANDER OF FIFTH INFANTRY DIVISION
WHICH STATIONED IN SOUTHERN SYRIA. WE ALSO BELIEVE THAT AN
OFFICER WAS KILLED IN THE MAZRAA QUARTER OF DAMASCUS A FEW
DAYS AGO. IN ADDITION, WE HAVE HEARD REPORTS THAT AN AIR
FORCE LT.C. NAMED KHALIFA, ALLEGEDLY AN ALAWITE, WAS MURDERED
IN ALEPPO WEEK-TEN DAYS AGO.

3. ONE DIFFICULTY IN SORTING FACT FROM FICTION IS THAT
DAMASCUS HAS BECOME A HOTHOUSE OF RUMOR AND SPECULATION
ABOUT THESE INCIDENTS, AS WE NOTED IN REF B. ONE SOURCE
TOLD US THAT WHEN THE REGIME REMAINED SILENT AFTER THE
RAZZUQ KILLING, IT LEFT THE FIELD OPEN FOR EVERYONE TO
INDULGE IN GOSSIP, WISHFUL THINKING AND OUTRIGHT FANTASIZING.
THE REGIME APPARENTLY HAS HAD SECOND THOUGHTS OF ITS OWN
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ABOUT THE WISDOM OF IGNORING SIGNIFICANT INCIDENTS AND HUS
IN EFFECT STIMULATING POPULAR DEBATE. SARG MEDIA REACTED
QUICKLY TO THE JULY 4 BOMBING BY ACCUSING IRAQ OF PERPETRATING
INCIDENT. BOTH JULY 5 AND 6 PAPERS
CONTAINED DETAILS ABOUT THE CRIME AND HAVE PROMISED TO KEEP
THE CITIZENRY INFORMED AS FRESH CLUES ARE TURNED UP. IN OUR
VIEW, THE REGIME IS TRYING TO KEEP PUBLIC OPINION FOCUSED ON
PERHAPS THE LEAST DANGEROUS EXPLANATION FOR THE INCIDENT, THAT
OUTSIDERS ARE STIRRING UP SYRIA'S INTERNAL DIFFICULTIES.

4. SOME WELL-INFORMED DAMASCENES DO NOT BELIEVE THE IRAQIS
ARE BEHIND THESE INCIDENTS. FOR EXAMPLE, AL-BAATH COLUMNIST
(SUNNI) WHO PAID CONDOLENCE CALL ON RAZZUQ FAMILY TOLD US
FAMILY MEMBERS OPENLY ACCUSED SUNNIS OF MURDERING THE BRIG.
(COLUMNIST HOTLY DENIED TO US THIS CHARGE AND REITERATED
HIS BELIEF KILLINGS CAUSED BY INTERNAL ALAWITE FEUDING).
A WELL-INFORMED ALAWITE SOURCE WHO BELONGS TO THE RIBE OF
LATE MAJ. GEN. MUHAMMAD UMRAN TOLD US SHORTLY AFTER RAZZUQ
MURDER THAT THE ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATIONS IN DAMASCUS,
ALEPPO, HOMS AND HAMA HAD ALL BEEN AGAINST ALAWITES
AND THAT VICTIMS WERE ALL "MEMBERS OF MY TRIBE. IT LOOKS
LIKE SOMEONE IS TRYING TO CREATE THE IMPRESSION THAT THERE

IS A DISPUTE BETWEEN US AND THE PRESIDENT'S TRIBE. IT SEEMS THAT SOMEONE WANTS US TO GATHER TOGETHER AND DO SOMETHING AGAINST THE PRESIDENT." HE SAID HE THOUGHT THE SUNNIS OR IRAQIS WERE BEHIND THE KILLINGS.

5. ON JULY 5 WE OBTAINED FROM MFA AMERICAN AFFAIRS DIRECTOR SHOEFI HIS VIEW OF THESE INCIDENTS. SHOEFI QUICKLY DISMISSED SARG "EVIDENCE" THAT IRAQIS RESPONSIBLE FOR BOMBING. ACCORDING TO HIM, IRAQIS HAVE A LAST FOUND STRONG POLITICAL ALLIES IN SYRIA WITH WHOM THEY CAN DEAL. SHOEFI SAID IRAQIS AND SUPPORTERS OF SALAH JADID HAVE REACHED AGREEMENT TO WORK TOGETHER IN OPPOSITION TO PRES. AL-ASSAD. HE SAID HE UNDERSTOOD MOST OF THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS HAD BEEN AGAINST ALAWITES FROM THE UMRAN TRIBE, AND DECLARED IT SECRET

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WAS SUPERFICIALLY PLAUSIBLE THAT JADIDISTS-IRAQIS WERE ELIMINATING UMRAMISTS, WHOM SHOEFI REGARDS AS STRONG AND WELL-PLACED POWER GROUP, BEFORE MOVING IN TO FINISH OFF REGIME ITSELF. HE ALLEGED THAT PRESIDENT ALS-ASSAD'S POWER BASE WAS WEAKER THAN APPEARANCES SUGGESTED, BECAUSE ONE OF THE PRESIDENT'S CHIEF PILLARS, HIS BROTHER RIF'AT, HAS LITTLE SUPPORT LEFT WITHIN THE OFFICER CORPS OF THE SYRIAN MILITARY.

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
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6. BUT HE CONCLUDED THAT MORE PROBING ANALYSIS WOULD BE THAT JADIDISTS-IRAQIS WOULD HAVE LITTLE INTEREST IN PLANNING THESE INCIDENTS TO FURTHER THEIR CAUSE. ON THE CONTRARY, HE SAID THAT INCIDENTS LEND TO INTERNAL POWER STRUGGLE A SECTARIAN APPEARANCE THAT JADID REALIZES HE CANNOT POSSIBLY BENEFIT FROM. INCIDENTS WEAKENED ABILITY OF ANY ALWAITE TO RETAIN POWER.

7. CONTINUING HIS ANALYSIS, SHOEFI SAID HE CONCERNED PRIMARILY WITH "NATIONAL INTERGRITY" OF SYRIA, AND SECONDARILY WITH AL-ASSAD'S FATE. SECTARIAN TENSIONS WERE RUNNING HIGH NOW IN SYRIA, AND IF REGIME WERE TOPPLED FOLLOWING SERIES OF VIOLENT INCIDENTS IT COULD PROVKE MUCH INTERNAL BLOODSHED. NO SERIOUS POLITICIAN IN SYRIA WANTED THIS DENOUEMENT. HE CRITICIZED AL-ASSAD FOR RESPONDING TO DIFFICULTIES AS SECURITY RATHER THAN POLITICAL ISSUE. HE SAID IT WAS ENCESSARY
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FOR AL-ASSAD TO "REASSESS" THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION AND TO SEEK WAY TO BROADEN HIS BASE BY BRINGING IN POLITICAL FROCES PRESENTLY OUTSIDE THE POLITICAL SYSTEM. HE CLAIMS AL-ASSAD HAS A REAL STRUGGLE ON HIS HANDS, AND WILL NEED ALL THE SUPPORT HE CAN GET (NOTE/ SHOEFI HIMSELF WOULD PROBABLY RELISH A CALL FROM THE PRESIDENCY TO ASSUME A MORE INFLUENTIAL POSITION THAN HE CURRENTLY MAINTAINS, AND THIS PERHAPS INFLUENCES HIS THINKING).

8. WE ASKED SHOEFI WHETHER HE COULD CONFIRM THAT BAGHDAD AND DAMASCUS WERE ENGAGED IN RENEWED ATTEMPT TO EFFECT RAPPROACHEMENT (SEE DAMASCUS 4160) PRIOR TO SARG MEDIA CHARGES THAT IRAQIS RESPONSIBLE FOR BOMGING. HE SAID HE HAD NO INFORMATION TO SUPPORT THIS. HE NOTED THAT LEADER OF IRAQI MILITARY SOCCER TEAM HAD RECENTLY BEEN DETAINED AT DAMASCUS AIRPORT WHEN TEAM ARRIVED TO PARTICIPATE IN COMPETITION, AND THAT QUESTION WHETHER TO RELEASE HIM HAD FINALLY BEEN DECIDED AT PRESIDENTIAL LEVEL AFTER IRAQIS THREATENED TO WITHDRAW FROM GAMES AND PUBLICIZE WHAT THEY REGARDED AS HOSTILE ACTION.

9. COMMENT: IN SPITE OF THE DIFFICULTY OF SEPARATING SUBSTANTIVE REPORTS ABOUT INTERNAL INCIDENTS FROM THE WELTER OF RUMORS CURRENTLY MAKING THE ROUNDS, IT APPEARS THAT THE KILLINGS ARE CONTINUING AND THAT REGIME AS YET UNABLE TO PREVENT THEM. MORE INCIDENTS CAN BE EXPECTED.

WE ARE FRANKLY SKEPTICAL THAT IRAQIS ARE DIRECTLY BEHIND ALL OF THESE INCIDENTS, ALTHOUGH THEY MAY BE RESPONSIBLE FOR SOME. IT SEEMS MORE LIKELY THAT AL-ASSAD IS CONFRONTING MULTIPLE INTERNAL OPPONENTS, INCLUDING SUNNIS AND ALAWAITES, A FEW OF WHOM ARE WELL ORGANIZED AND DETERMINED TO CONTINUE THE VIOLENCE UNTIL HE IS REMOVED (OR THEY ARE UNCOVERED.) OPPONENTS HAVE SO FAR FAILED TO PANIC PRESIDENT
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OR TO BROADEN THEIR ACTIVITIES BEYOND SELECTIVE VIOLENCE.

10. REPORTED LINKAGE BETWEEN JADID SUPPORTERS AND IRAQIS, IF TRUE, COULD PROVIDE LATTER WITH SOME POTENTIALLY POWERFUL ASSETS IN ALAWITE COMMUNITY AND FORMER WITH ASSURED FOREIGN BACKING. IN PAST, HOWEVER, IRAQIS AND SYRIAN BAATHI EXILES IN BAGHDAD HAVE REGARDED JADID AS MUCH AN "USURPER" AS ASSAD. TO ENTER SUCH AN ALLIANCE JADID'S FOLLOWERS WOULD ALSO HAVE HAD TO COMPROMISE PREVIOUSLY-HELD PRINCIPLES. IN ANY EVENT, EACH ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ADDS TO CREATING A SIEGE MENTALITY AMONG THE ALAWITE OFFICER CORPS WHICH IS THE REGIME'S STRONGEST PILLAR. FURTHERMORE, IF THE IRAQIS HAVE FOUND NEW ALLIES IN SYRIA THIS COULD HAVE BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR ME PEACE SETTLEMENT EFFORTS WITH ASSAD HAVING TO FACE GROWING REJECTIONIST PRESSURES BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL, AS HE CONTINUES HIS INVOLVEMENT IN THE PEACE PROCESS.
MURPHY

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